

Surface Mining of Non-Fuel Minerals

FY 2002 Annual Report

Non-fuel minerals are mined in all 67 Alabama counties and contribute greatly to the state's economy. Examples of non-fuel minerals mined in Alabama are: sand, gravel, clay, bauxite, and shale. This section makes certain that lands mined for those minerals are reclaimed in accordance with the Alabama Surface Mining Act of 1969. In addition, this section issues mining permits, ensures that mine sites are properly bonded for reclamation purposes, makes periodic reclamation and safety inspections, and releases bonds once sites have been satisfactorily reclaimed.

Act 99-579, effective 10/1/99, ushered in several much-needed amendments to Alabama's surface mining law. Operators are now required to slope highwalls, leave a 50-foot setback of undisturbed material, test soil, and revegetate their sites. The Department can now deny issuing permits in certain circumstances and impose fines for violating the setback requirement.

In FY 2002, 383 permits (28 new and 355 renewals) were issued to operators for the surface mining of non-fuel minerals in Alabama. This was a slight increase from FY 2001. Meanwhile, a large number of unpermitted surface mining operations are known to exist in the state, and efforts continued with one employee on staff to gain compliance in as many of those situations as possible.

The one inspector stationed in the Montgomery Central Office made two hundred fifty-eight (258) site inspections. Of that total, 28 inspections were made to verify locations of new permit areas, 100 inspections were made of active operations, 90 inspections were made of operations with expired permits, 30 inspections were made of unpermitted sites, and 35 inspections were made to investigate citizen complaints. The purpose of those inspections was to verify permit and bond status, check reclamation for bond release or forfeiture, make certain that equipment was maintained in safe working order, and identify any areas that were not permitted.

Thirteen (13) permits were amended to add acreage, 36 bonds were released for adequate reclamation, and 24 bonds were forfeited due to failure to reclaim. The increased reclamation bond (from \$150/acre to \$2,500/acre effective 10/1/97) encouraged more reclamation and continued use of permitted sites.

Other activities included over 677 telephone contacts with operators, surety companies, citizens, other agencies, and landowners. Over 823 letters were written to mining operators regarding results of site inspections and action needed to remain in compliance with the *Alabama Surface Mining Act of 1969*. Citizen complaints involving blasting at quarries, highwalls too close to property lines, sediment discharge from uncontrolled runoff, and lack of reclamation were promptly investigated. An estimated 80 sites were abandoned and left unreclaimed at year's end, with insufficient funds to complete any meaningful reclamation. Mining continues at approximately 320 permitted sites, with 148 sites being idle, abandoned, or in process of being reclaimed.

Substantial increases in mining of aggregates (limestone, marble, sand, gravel, and crushed stone) are anticipated in FY 2003. As residential areas encroach on the sources of those minerals, increased citizen complaints will need to be addressed. For more information, contact: Brian J. Wittwer, 334-242-8265, phone; 334-242-8403, fax.